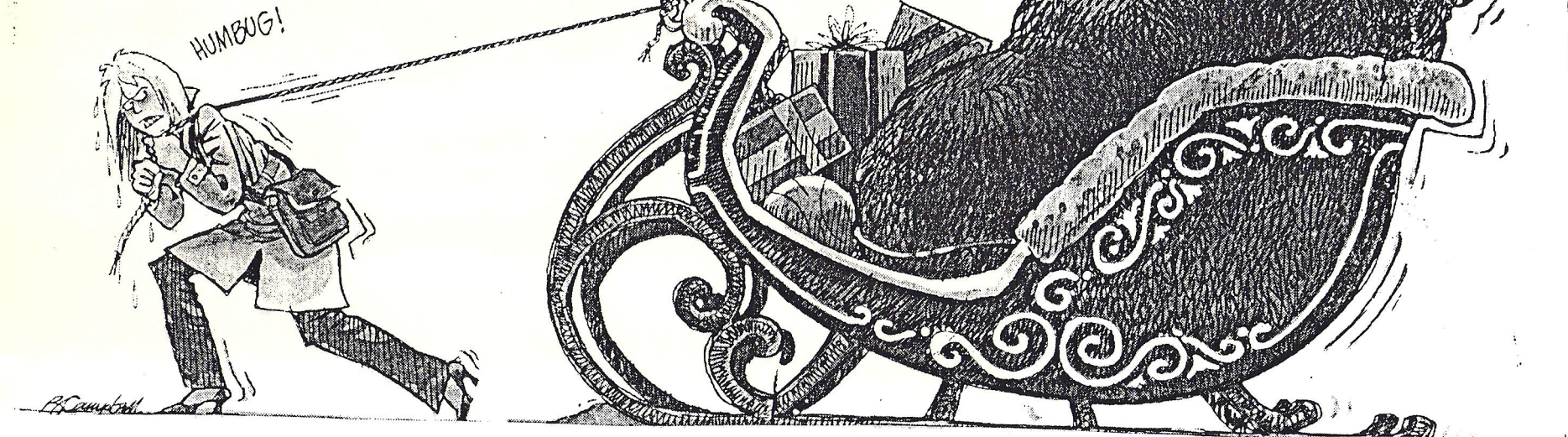


Singing the holler-day blues



by GLENNA ANDRADE
Special to The Bee

The holiday season, spanning the brief time between Halloween and Valentine's Day, closes in too quickly.

Nevertheless, I ignore the onset of the season and the onslaught of hopping as long as I can. I pretend that pre-Christmas sales are simply post-Christmas sales delayed by a month or so. I brace the books on my shelves with new catalogues and shred the brochures that nest daily in my mailbox.

The urgency of shopping for the season was voiced by my sister some weeks back. "Do you know," he moaned, "that Halloween's already over, and I haven't finished my Christmas shopping yet?"

During this time, department stores enter the holiday spirit without much restraint. Black plaiders dangle from displays, jack-lanterns grin at each cash register, turkeys perch atop clothing racks, and in the background, Bing Crosby croons "White Christmas." I sometimes feel as if the year is rushing by with the rapidity of a

calendar on a 1930's movie.

Finally, Christmas takes over. The city wreathes itself in holiday decorations, and Fresno glitters like Las Vegas. Outdoor lights wink to the evening crowds. Plastic bells, reminiscent of quickie wedding chapels, hang mutely on light poles. Strung between each, silver strands flitter and flounce like showgirls' tassels. Three gold balls hang from each light standard, similar to and prophetic of pawnbrokers' emblems.

Inside the stores disharmony reigns; the material often upstages the spiritual. Cash registers ding like chimes-gone-mad on nickel slots. Confusion smears the words of Christmas carols into something like "Wreck the Halls" and "Violent Night." Everyone seems "after" his own piece on earth; the only good will seems to be the Salvation Army's Santa who is generally ignored. People have the same expressions while they shop as when they gamble: souring and scouring. Free brochures, proclaiming the upcoming attractions, litter the counters, enticing everyone to hurry and spend.

Spending has become so aesthetic

these days. Plastic credit cards, checks embellished with seaside scenes and clean-ball point pens replace paper bills and metal coins. Overshopping is encouraged, for buying with plastic money is rather like gambling with chips: It's not actually money that's spent.

Long before Thanksgiving, I know with the most devastating apprehension that soon one of my relatives will ask, "What can I get your children for Christmas?" Even after polite denials of "I don't know" and "Whatever you think," I get nailed with two specific questions: "What do they want?" and "What size are they?"

I would like to confess that I cannot predict what size each child will be in two months. Instead, I guess, and I always guess wrong. I usually assume that if Karen is an 8 now, she'll be a 10 by Christmas. Certainly though, if I say size 10, she'll not only stop growing but also lose enough weight to be ensnared by a size 6. And no matter what her size will be, that size will be sold out after Christmas. If it isn't, she hates it anyway.

Taste is another difficult thing to predict. If Karen is dying for a rainbow shirt in October, it'll be too cold in December to wear it, and by March the item will be out of style. If I suggest a red shirt, Karen later decides she prefers pink because by Christmas time she is bored with red, and the gift arrives in orange, which she then loves although she has nothing to wear with it, and everything else orange will be discontinued.

When I think about hobbies and sports, I recall that I've always been wrong here too. In October the kids want water skis; by December they want snow skis. If Kevin has been hinting for a new soccer ball, he'll have saved up enough allowances to buy it himself two days before Christmas. Should Keith beg for a pocket calculator, by December a new model will not only figure out square root but shake his hand in congratulations.

Their favorite rock group, Crash, will have come out with a newer and better album. Or the kids will switch tastes from heavy metal to pink-haired punk. They will no

longer want records or ready-made tapes, because they will have in the meantime acquired a good friend who'll record either for them on blank cassette tapes.

Adolescents thrive on obsolescence.

Each time I hear "We Three Kings," I think of the children. As they grow older, their requests become more expensive. At age 6 Kevin wanted Hot Wheels; at 16, hubcaps. Karen at 5 pleaded for horse statues; at 15, she proposed we buy her the real thing. And Keith, who was delighted with a harmonica at 3, at 13 requested an electric guitar with 40-inch amplifiers.

In years past, I've always given my relatives my best suggestions, which leaves me panicky and empty-headed when I go shopping. They, then, snuggle in comfortably at the table Thanksgiving Day and sigh smugly, "Well, I've finished my Christmas shopping. How are you doing on yours?" Someday, I'm going to tell them.

About three days before

Christmas, when I think I've finished my shopping, an uncalendared occasion is observed: "Parents Evening Out." But instead of this being an excursion without the children, the evening out is actually a process of "evening out." I rush to the nearest discount store because Kevin has four presents, Karen has six, and Keith only three.

The solitude of shopping without the children is disturbed by certain shoppers who act like children. Dialogues turn into mindless monologues: "Do you mind..." and "I saw it first!" and "It's mine!" My youngest child described my emotions precisely when he exclaimed, "Oh goody! Mom's going shopping for gifts for the 'holler-days!'"

I don't know what happened to the old controversy about not using "Xmas" for "Christmas," but if I had my way, I'd use the X-mas to cross the entire day off the calendar. Whenever I'm Christmas shopping and I hear "Away in a Manger," that's just where I'd rather be.